

India's Political Take-off

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In every developing political system two species of politics can be identified, the politics of ideology and the politics of action. An analysis of the interaction between the two can throw up some of the most important facets of the nature and direction of political change taking place in such a system.

In India this interaction has taken place under peculiar historical and institutional conditions. Two factors need to be specially noted.

In the first place, the highly organised independence movement ensured that the Government to whom power was transferred could count on a fairly long period of uninterrupted rule.

In the second place, however, it had to — and to all appearances it wanted to — function under a political system in which success in elections was essential for political survival,

The first factor — the stability of the Government — led to an excessive concern with ideological issues and a disregard by all parties of the practical problems of organisation. This was helped by the missionary and romanticist fervour to build up an independent, strong and modern nation which derived from the ideal of a 'continuous revolution, born during the movement for independence. This led to a long period of what may be termed 'romantic politics'.

The second condition — the need to work within the framework of a democratic constitution — led, on the other hand, to a gradual change in the political climate to shifts in power and to a struggle for political ascendancy, which gained momentum with every election. The near-monopoly of power of the Congress party, meant that this struggle for power was waged, for the most part, within the ruling party — the other parties exercising at best, a marginal influence on the changing fortunes of factions within the Congress.

The net result of this complex of interactions was a gradual widening of the gulf between the politics of ideology conducted at the higher ranks of the party; and the Politics of action — conducted in the 'field'.

For a time' the 'bickerings' within the party were concealed behind the ideological smokescreen. But now on the eve of the third General Elections, the struggle promises to come out into the open.

An attempt has been made here to indicate the emerging pattern of political development and the possible direction it might take in the coming crucial decade.

THE tasks of nation-building that faced India on Independence were indeed formidable. The manner in which the national leadership approached the problems of consolidation and of preserving the unity of the nation evoked admiration from all quarters. The next task was to consider the aims and purposes of the new State was to pursue and the institutional set-up required for fulfilling them. This task was also performed in a thorough manner, the adoption of a federal-democratic political structure and the setting up of the Planning Commission were in consonance with the purposes set in the Constitution. They provided a workable formal apparatus with which the social, economic and political changes necessary for driving out a modern State from a traditional society could be worked at. All that was needed was organisation and drive to give content to the constitutional forms by building up an institutional continuum that would lay the basis of a free

and integrated society. Such organisational effort had to use existing institutions and interest groups, mobilising latent human and material resources and attending to the concrete problems of piecemeal change. But while much of the work remained to be done in the form of activating the infra-structure of society, there was a sound basis from which to proceed — an atmosphere of general confidence in the leadership and much goodwill and patience among the politically articulate.

Ironically, the very factors that made for stability militated against the adoption of a realistic attitude towards the tasks of nation-building. The political development of the country after the adoption of the Constitution and formation of the Planning Commission can be roughly divided into three phases: the first half of the nineteen fifties, marked generally by political unity, mobilisation of economic resources and

rural uplift; the latter half of the fifties, marked by complacency in the Congress leadership and a gradual drift into ideological politics; and, third, the period from the beginning of the sixties, marked by an intense struggle for power and the rise of a new political elite.

Preoccupation with Ideology

I shall not discuss the first period here except to say that some of the seeds of the present struggle — especially the manner in which a new leadership has emerged — were sown then. The second period, starting roughly with the linguistic ferment in the country, is crucial for the understanding of India's political development. It was marked by two interacting tendencies. There was on the one hand, a feeling of complacency among the Congress leadership, largely on account of the ineffectiveness of the opposition parties and the successful implementation of the First Plan. On



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the other hand, there was growing concern over 'fissiparous tendencies' in the political sphere and slow progress of programmes, especially on the agricultural front. The absence of political opposition and the fact that the expected 'permanent revolution' was somehow not coming led to an increasing pre-occupation with ideological issues. Solemn resolutions, schemes, blueprints and "studies" that offered neat formulae — in sum a general rise of romantic politics — were the result. These gave a special style and flavour to the vocabulary of Indian politics. In the process, the work of building up organisations and initiative at various levels was seriously neglected.

II

State of the Ruling Party

This phase of development needs closer examination. The period was marked by the quasi-monopolistic position of the Congress. The traditional attitudes to political authority and the lingering public image of the Congress created during the freedom movement buttressed its position further. Secondly, the needs of centralised planning and ideology of a welfare State enabled the ruling party to control all avenues of power, not simply in the political sphere but in society as a whole. Its net of patronage was cast far and wide. Thirdly, the near-unanimity among most thinking men, at home and abroad, on the type of programme on which an under-developed country should launch made the ruling party appear to be the most important vehicle of progress.

Such a situation had two important consequences. As noted above, lack of a real threat to the Congress party's power led to concentration on the goals to which the country should move; detached from the grim considerations of power, the orientation of politics became ideological. But since the ideology was based less on a study of the society in which it was to be practised and more on intuition and abstract reasoning, and often uncritical imitation, politics became more and more romantic; the missionary zeal of the nationalist leadership gave way to wishful thinking.

Rise of Romantic Politics

A socialistic pattern of society and a co-operative commonwealth, the Utopia of a communitarian order as envisaged in the programme for 'democratic decentralisation', the moral overtones accompanying the programmes for Community Development, the ghost of disintegration invented out of stray and unconnected manifestations of particularistic behaviour and the resultant bogey of National Integration, the approach to the minority problem, a 'national front' of political parties impelled by the 'compulsions of a developing economy' (a political scientist has now come out in support of the dream¹) withdrawal of men of experience from political power, and the platitudinous appeals to party men and countrymen to disown caste and communal affiliations — these are all evidence of a political ethos bred in a period of unbridled romanticism, in which the Congress did not have to face the challenge of an adversary and, consequently, did not need to apply intelligence to the piecemeal work of institution-building, and did not have to stand the scrutiny of a scientific study of social issues before it embarked on a mammoth programme of action.

The other result of the Congress monopoly of power provides another dimension to the developing political pattern. Lack of real opposition from outside has led to a struggle for political power within the ruling party. Gradually this developed into a recognisable pattern, marked by the inter-play of easily identifiable factions. Thus although the preoccupation of the national leadership with blueprints for modernisation produced what has been termed above as romantic, politics on the national level, the political process could not long remain aloof from the struggle for power that lies in its logic. The result of the interaction between these two levels of politics — the politics of modernisation and the politics of power — was the widening gulf between the higher and lower tiers of political leadership. With the gradual decline of the absolute dependence on

the former of the latter, a change has set in. Those in charge of the District and the Taluka have begun to realise that true power comes not from legislative seats but from the control of local institutions, that it lies not in charisma but in organisation. And with this, Indian politics has entered a new-phase in which the old, awe-inspiring, civil and urbanised leadership has come face to face with a new generation of leaders which has its roots in the rural side, which has its grip on local organisations, which is also fired by its own romanticism, a contempt for the 'westernised', a regard for strict order and discipline a chronic inferiority complex, and a sense of certainty and conviction in what it is out to do. This rural elite is an entirely new force on the Indian political scene. It has begun to assert itself in not a few places. It will soon capture strategic positions in the Establishment.

These two results of the Congress monopoly of power — the rise of romantic politics and the rise of a new rural elite — bear an important relation to each other. In the fascination for the former, the coming of the latter almost went unnoticed for a time. Ideological orientation of the whole tone of politics provided a curtain behind which the stage for the coming struggle for power was being set. With the advent of the sixties, the curtain has been lifted. On the other hand, it appears certain that the legacy of romantic politics will continue: indeed it is likely that at least in the initial period, the new claimants to power will invoke ideological arguments rather more than less: that is the only means of legitimising their authority in the eyes of a people fed on such arguments. The content of ideology may, however change imperceptibly.

Ideological Cleavage

Indeed, the cleavage between the old urbanised elite and the new-leadership is partly ideological. The new elite is made up of men who spent their formative years of life in a period when Mahatma Gandhi was in full command of Indian nationalism and when the earlier currents of thought had spent their

¹ Prof S V Kogekar in his Presidential Address to the Indian Political Science Conference held at Cuttack, December 1961.

force. The tradition of self-sacrifice as the hallmark of political conduct, the sense of importance of 'constructive work' and programmes for rural uplift, and the preference for plain living and spartan ethics is deep in these men. It was natural, therefore, that they began to regard the new rulers of Independent India with some misgiving, seeing them as leaving the 'Gandhian way' ignoring the villages, imitating the 'West too soft to the 'bureaucracy', and far removed from 'the people' and 'the party'. A deep-lying hostility to the urban elite and a sense of being kept out of power for long have given a sharp edge and lent an impatience to their struggle for political ascendancy. They preach a return to the Gandhian way — in what manner they never explain — to the hard discipline that characterised the 'movement' to decentralisation of power and to the party's control over the Government and the bureaucracy. In many ways these men share the ideals and temperament of the Sarvodayaites except in their view of political power. Their approach to politics is dogmatic, self-righteous, presumptuous — only *they* know what the people want and on the whole, cavalier.

It is possible to draw some parallel between the phases through which the movement for Independence passed and the phases of political development since Independence. Corresponding to the liberal-Parliamentary phase of the national movement is the phase in post-Independence, political development that is now coming to a close, liberal and universalist in outlook, tolerant to dissent, placing less emphasis on organisation and more on ideals, humane and aristocratic in approach. The militant 'Gandhian' phase in the style (if not the content) of politics has now begun with the rise of the new rural elite to power.

Politics of Backwardness

This is the beginning of the politics of backwardness. Till now the integrating influence of the national leadership and local inertia or deference to those higher up limited the political struggle to a loose accommodation between personalities, interest groups and factions. Now

with the diffusion of power lower down the hierarchy, politics will increasingly approximate to the dominant values of a traditional, fragmented, society. It is a known irony of the politics of backwardness that the closer the political process is to the people, the more authoritarian it becomes. On the other hand, bringing the political process closer to the life-experience of the people is the one sure way of fighting backwardness. The dilemma will become more and more clear.

In a very real sense, this new phase in India's political development was inevitable. The urbanised leadership at the national and State levels itself prepared the way for it. In order to make itself secure in its position, the Congress leadership increasingly relied on the rural vote, spreading its patronage deep into the countryside, by controlling credit co-operatives, community centres, local authorities, educational institutions, welfare agencies and other developmental organisations, including the voluntary agencies. For a time this served the leadership well; they were provided with appendages to the power that was really wielded by the Assembly, the Parliament, and the State and Central Cabinets. In the process, however, a new leadership, neither designed for promoted, emerged. By taking hold of institutions wielding patronage and the local party organisations, the new men slowly crept into the Congress organisation at the State level. The struggle over the selection of candidates for the forthcoming elections is an index of the growing cleavage between the new 'organisation man' and the old-time politician. This struggle has set the stage for the third phase of political development.

III

Emerging Pattern of Party Politics

The character of this struggle needs investigation. To describe it merely in terms of a rural-urban cleavage would be an over-simplification. The cleavage is not simply one of origin or orientation².

² In this sense, the analysis presented here differs from. Myron Werners in his study of West Bengal leadership.

These aspects are there but there is more to it. For, essentially it is a power struggle which, as it is growing, is becoming more and more complex, new alignments constantly cutting across more simple division of interests.

This is important. For, the men who are now rising to power are, in their turn, facing fresh rivals. This is already clear from the scramble for the Congress ticket for the coming elections. New factions have arisen and alignments between factions at different levels in the hierarchy, including the State and national levels still manned by the urban leaders, have been forged. The period after the elections will see a fierce struggle between these faction-chains.

The consolidation of the organisational wing of the Congress party against the old guard is giving way to new rivalries among the organisers themselves. This and the inability of the party to accommodate all claimants are of utmost contemporary interest. This is breaking entirely new ground in the development of party politics in the country. The most likely possibility is that important sections of Congressmen — not simply the frustrated and the ineffective as happened hitherto — will join hands with other parties, at first informally, then openly. The increasing incidence of Congressmen working against official Congress candidates is a feature of Congress politics. Already there are *en bloc* resignations; more will follow after the elections. Some of these dissidents may retire from politics but many will join other parties, for unlike the dissidents in the first and second General Elections, the dissidents this time are men who have made political activity their life careers. They are also *men* with considerable institutional backing, confident of their strength, and not given to accept defeat lying down.

Prospect for the Opposition

This exodus will strengthen opposition groups in the particular areas, although this in itself is not enough to predict the rise of a strong *national* opposition. Opposition parties in this country are

largely State parties or coalitions of State parties. What is likely is that in different States, different parties will pose a threat to the Congress. The structural barriers to any consolidation of this position by mergers and amalgamations are too great to be surmounted. Most opposition parties are content to be powerful at the State level. But, even so, the opposition to the Congress is likely to gain momentum, at times due to shifts in electoral choice, more due to shifts of politicians between parties.

Effective political mobility at the present stage of political development in the country largely depends on the incidence of dissidence from the Congress party. For, that is the only means of breaking the Congress monopoly of power which is backed by patronage opportunities and institutional support unprecedented in the history of democratic parties. It is only when a sizeable section, along with the organisations under their command, breaks away from the Congress and joins the opposition that an opposition party can gain real strength. Such a development seems in the offing.

There is also another aspect of the struggle within Congress that needs to be noted. This is the various and competing *foci* of power. Here a shift in emphasis is becoming evident. The familiar struggle between the organisational and governmental wings within the party still aimed at control of the Government. Legislative seats and governmental power were the main objects of political competition. The position is now changing. For, under the influence of the romanticism in politics discussed above and the Gandhian ideology of the new elite, governmental power is being diffused to lower levels of authority. 'Democratic decentralisation' involves delegation of authority to Talukas and Tehsils, to village Panchayats and Block-level Panchayat Samitis. Congressmen are beginning to realise the potentialities of this delegation of authority. Positions in panchayat samitis, district co-operative banks, development boards, educational institutions and Government-subsidised

voluntary agencies will become no less attractive than legislative and even governmental positions to a politician. Already during the last five years, Congressmen have begun to realise that real power is in the party organisation and other institutions, not in the legislature. This feeling is likely to spread.

A Parallel Bureaucracy ?

This has two important implications- What is commonly understood as transfer of power from higher to the lower levels is really a transfer of power from officials to non-officials. It is taking away power from the administration and handing it over to the politician. This can have serious consequences. There will rise "a parallel bureaucracy, one that is based on a different system of recruitment, really on a Spoils system". The rivalry between the two can undermine both the efficiency and the morale of the administration. Second, there is the question of co-ordination. From what is known, not enough thought has been given to how the functions handed over to the panchayat hierarchy and the functions retained by the bureaucracy are to be coordinated for the efficient execution of policies. Here the danger is of fragmentation of governmental power, rendering administration disjointed and inefficient and confusing the citizen by making him submit to so many authorities. The upshot will be a drastic change in the relationship between administration and politics.

The other implication is equally ominous. The spoils available at all these levels can solve the problem of dissensions in the Congress; those who are not given the ticket can be given charge of other organs of power. Spheres of influence can be carved out, political skills specialised and the party's sway over society widened. Some such adjustments are evident at the moment within the Congress. If they increase sufficiently in scope, we will have a monolithic party, commanding all vantage positions of social and economic power, in effect becoming a State within a State and the end of progress towards a democratic party system.

All available evidence indicates, however, that a steady strengthening of opposition parties cannot be avoided for long; the struggle for power can no longer be 'contained' within the Congress. But while it is possible for other parties to increase their influence and even assume power in some States, the general paramouncy of politics over society may yet continue in each State. If such a development is not prevented, politics will not only become totalitarian, it will also become chaotic, given the federal structure of Government.

Direction of Political Change

If the Labour party lost the elections for the fourth successive time, it would cease to be regarded as an alternative Government. British democracy could then be said to have reached a dead end. This is the crucial issue in all Parliamentary democracies : how to effect a change in Government. So is it in India. In fact India provides an interesting case study. For, change here does not take place through a known mechanism that has been stabilised and, in turn, legitimised by long usage (such as the two-party system in England). Political change in a developing system takes subtler forms and often defies comprehension.

An attempt has been made here to examine the stages through which political development has passed in this country. The analysis is tentative and is meant to provide a basis for further investigation and discussion. It suggests that India is in the throes of a political 'take-off'. The difference from a take-off in economic development is that its direction is not pre-planned or even predictable. Having gained some momentum it can take either of the two diametrically opposite directions; there may even be more than two alternative directions. The takeoff stage in politics occurs when a society reaches the cross-roads in political development. The future depends on the route along; which it then decides to move forward. The take-off in politics is not necessarily a matter for celebration. But if we know the wind, we can chart our ship with due preparation.

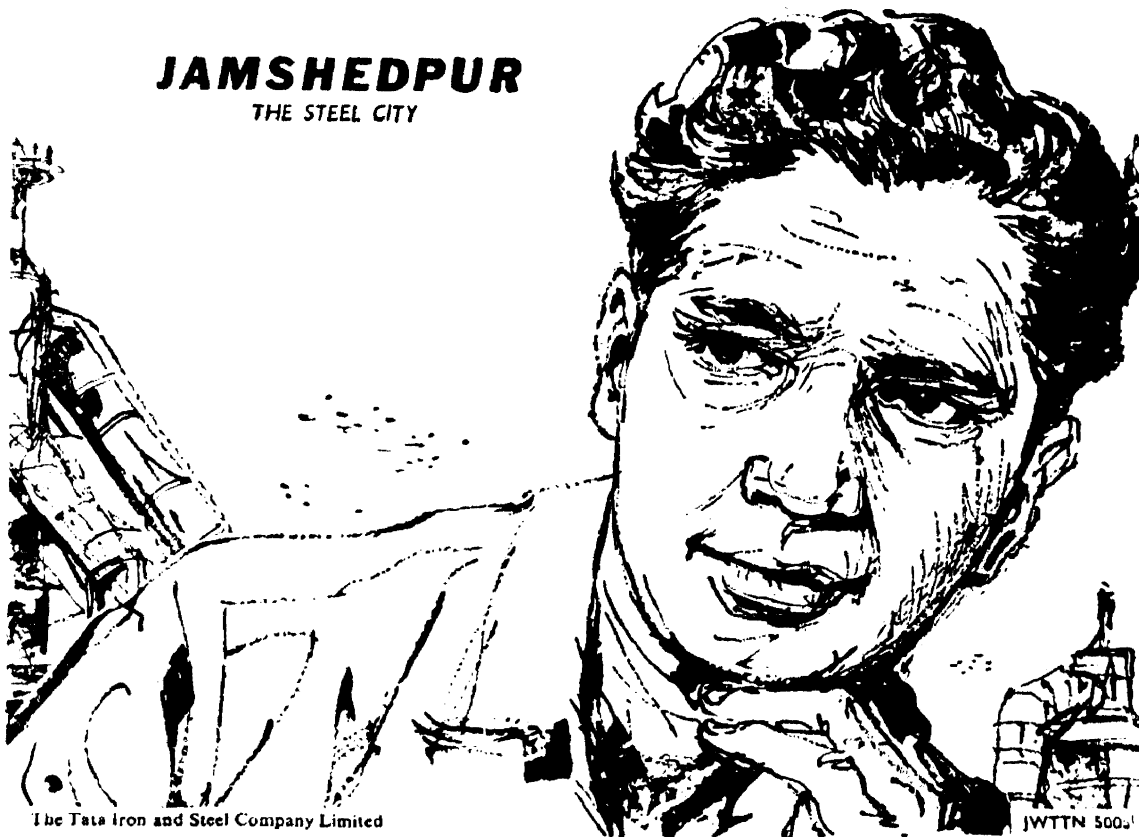
One who did not waver...

Jamshedpur's latest blast furnace needed a 'big bell' — a 20-ton component requiring highly skilled casting and machining. A difficult operation even if the right machine tools were available, but in 1958 they were not, and import seemed the only solution to all but one determined and resourceful young engineer, N. P. Naik.

Working on this problem in his leisure hours, Naik gradually crystallised his ideas in to mathematical formulae and blue-prints. He developed, at the same time, a new machine tool to do the job by remodelling a small boring machine, stage by stage. Then started the casting and intricate machining, until, in a short time, Naik and his colleagues succeeded in producing a 'big bell', fully meeting the technical specifications to the last detail. As a tribute to Naik's fine endeavour, Tata Steel gave him an award of Rs. 10,000, the highest made under a ten-year old scheme to encourage initiative from the shop floor.

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